

## Model Programs and Initiatives for Reducing Recidivism in Tompkins County

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### ABSTRACT

Formerly incarcerated persons face many barriers upon release that places them at a high-risk for re-offending. Previous research has indicated that access to employment, education, housing and more are essential for preventing recidivism. This information has shifted the conversation around reentry in many communities across the United States, including right here at home in Tompkins County. Our local community has organized to establish several organizations that interrogate our criminal justice system and provide services to the populations affected by it, however there is more that needs to be done. Although the Tompkins County Jail is the only carceral institution in the community, we are surrounded by many correctional facilities all a short distance away. This means that the community is constantly engaging with formerly incarcerated persons, a population that is often excluded and forgotten about. My research examines the existing resources for reentry in Tompkins County and provides recommendations for new initiatives that could be implemented to help reduce recidivism.

In fall of 2018, I collaborated with the Ultimate Reentry Opportunity Initiative (URO) and Dr. Paula Ioanide from the Center for Culture, Race and Ethnicity to conduct a solution-oriented research on successful reentry models and programs for formerly incarcerated persons. I began with researching qualitative studies that were found to be effective in encouraging community reintegration. These models emphasized the significance of distinguishing the several phases of reentry, engaging participants through meaningful connections and using a problem-solving approach to the cases of each participant. Keeping these models in mind, I then went on to research current reentry programs in the United States that are using innovative and unique strategies to address employment, housing and education.

My findings suggest that Tompkins County is lacking in service providers that focus on the specific needs and challenges that formerly incarcerated persons face. Because criminal records are highly stigmatized, service providers must be conscious of the barriers around reentry and be trained to offer the adequate support and resources. The additional benefit to having an extensive network of reentry programs is that it reduces the risk of excluding populations who are in need of these services the most, high-risk offenders with violent felonies. Based on the model programs found on employment, I recommend that the Ithaca Mayor's Office builds off of its current work on reentry by implementing an initiative that directly connects formerly incarcerated persons to employers who are reentry friendly and use an equitable hiring process. In regard to housing, I suggest that the existing programs follow the lead of the Burlington Housing Authority by collaborating with correctional facilities, probation/parole officers and local landlords to help this population transition into permanent housing upon release. Finally, I recommend that Ithaca College and Cornell University expand on their prison education program to allow its incarcerated participants to continue their education at the university after they finish serving time.

My work with URO and Dr. Ioanide served as a preliminary research report for the URO data development group and a Cornell University research class that will be doing work on reentry. I also shared my findings with President Collado and the senior leadership team to propose that the college bans the question on employment applications that asks if the applicant has a criminal record. Ithaca College is one of the biggest employers in Tompkins County, therefore it is

important that as an institution we are re-evaluating our policies and guidelines that potentially deter and exclude individuals with criminal records from applying for jobs at the college. We suggested that human resources establish clear hiring guidelines on background checks and are transparent with prospective employees on who has access to that information throughout the hiring process. The administration has been following our recommendations by developing a background check policy and working on removing the question from its application. The ability to apply my research to the campus community and see changes occurring because of it has been an extremely rewarding experience and is evidence of the importance of student contributions.

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